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# Evidencing the passion of language teachers' research engagement: The case of a University Pedagogy ALMS course module

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**Abstract:** This paper presents a case example of a University Pedagogy course module carried out in ALMS (Autonomous Learning Modules) format. The participants of the course were mainly in-service language teachers of the University of Helsinki Language Centre, and the author of this report is a module instructor and counsellor. The motivation for the ALMS course module was twofold: (1) to enhance research engagement of language teachers in their professional development and (2) to offer support but freedom (autonomy) in terms of personal goals, the form of the individual project as well as the schedule of the process. This paper presents the course in brief and discusses some of the key elements in fostering critical thinking and research engagement in professional development in the context of Language Centres. The data analyzed consist of pre-course assignments delivered by the participants, their work plans, final reflective learning reports as well as the counsellor's diary.

**Keywords:** language teachers, learner autonomy, research engagement, professional development, Exploratory Practice

## 1 The context: A reflective practitioner working for understanding

Kansanen (1995) pointed out that a teacher's work is constant decision-making and is often unconsciously normative. Behind the decision-making is a personal value system and beliefs. Challenging these requires going beyond the action level and asking "why" questions which, as Kansanen argues, teachers

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do not necessarily do (see also Kagan 1992; Sfard 1998). A critical approach to teaching is what teachers' research engagement is initially good for. In the University of Helsinki and its independent institute Language Centre, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL; see Hutchings and Shulman 1999) is taken seriously on both the University strategic level and the resource level. One indication of this is that the University of Helsinki has 14 Senior Lecturers in University Pedagogy, one of which (the author of this paper) has been based at the Language Centre to participate in management procedures, to offer pedagogical support and training for university instructors in the local context as well as to carry out research on language learning and teaching in higher education (see Toom et al. 2013 for a general description of this network).<sup>1</sup> The training provided by the local Senior Lecturer in University Pedagogy has included annually offered University Pedagogy courses (UP) which have been geared to support agency and research engagement in professional development of language teachers. This report will examine one of the UP courses as a means for supporting reflection and research engagement and raising the "quality of life" of both language teachers and learners. The ultimate aim of the present report is to demonstrate how research engagement can be a natural and rewarding part of language teaching practitioners' work and routines.

In his critical analysis of teacher research in language teaching, Borg argues (2013: 6) that teacher research (TR) "has the potential to be a powerful transformative force in the professional development of language teachers". While there are a number of potential barriers to TR, such as non-collaborative work culture or unsupportive (not research-friendly) leadership, the potential drivers are also many. It has been shown that if the aforementioned two barriers are overcome, a Language Centre has a good starting point in overcoming also the other potential barriers, such as limitations in skills and knowledge, or limitations in financial resources, which are often not the primary hurdles although perhaps the most discussed ones (see Lehtonen et al. 2015a, 2015b; for evidence in the University of Helsinki Language Centre context).

According to Borg (2013: 15–17, and the literature cited), teacher research can, among other things, allow more reflective, critical and analytic thinking and develop teacher autonomy in professional decision-making and development. The case of the UP course described in the following will illuminate this mechanism on a micro-level.

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<sup>1</sup> The network of Senior Lecturers of University Pedagogy is part of the Helsinki University teaching management system, and from 1.1.2017 on based at a separate unit, the Centre for University Teaching and learning.

## 2 The case of UniPeda ALMS – putting quality of life first

### 2.1 The course in brief and the participants

In the academic year 2015–2016 a University Pedagogy course module *Evidence-based development of teaching* (5 ECTS) was offered for the LC instructors, for the first time in the ALMS (Autonomous Learning Modules) format. The inspiration for this came from the long tradition of pedagogy for autonomy and ALMS counselling in the English unit of the LC (e.g., Karlsson et al. 1997; Karlsson and Kjisik 2014; Bradley et al. 2016; see <http://www.helsinki.fi/kksc/alms/>). The principles of learner autonomy in this course allowed individual freedom in terms of work plan and its schedule between the beginning of the course (early October 2015) and end of the course (mid-May 2016). Twelve teachers representing six different languages participated in the course, and one representing academic administration staff. As the counsellor of the course, I positioned myself as one of the learners, learning the practice of counselling. (In the analysis below, the counsellor's perspective is however excluded from the data.)

It was requested that all participants would at least be engaged *with* research, that is, by reading research as a way of integrating insights from reading with one's existing pedagogical practices and theories. However, the participants were systematically encouraged to consider engaging *in* research, that is, doing research. (For this distinction, see Borg 2010, 2013).

A pre-course task in flipped-classroom format asked participants to reflect on their development interests and potential theoretical framework. Before this, the participants were to familiarize themselves with the principles of the Reflective Practitioner (e.g. Britton and Serrat 2013) and Exploratory Practice (e.g., Allwright and Hanks 2009; Hanks 2015), with reference to articles and videos provided. During the first two common orientation sessions, peer groups were set up (referred to as Organized Peer Groups, hereafter OPG). The subsequent OPG sessions during the 7 months of the course were jointly planned. The assessment and feedback practices of the course were also negotiated, but these details are excluded from this report.

During the course, each participant worked according to his/her individual work plan, which was agreed upon with the counsellor and discussed in two orientation sessions before the Christmas break. The remainder of this section presents an overview of the participant activities, with a special focus on

informal peer groups in Section 2.2.2. Experiences and reflections on research engagement are dealt with in Section 3, with special attention given to the professional development and satisfaction perspective. Section 4 discusses briefly the benefits of research engagement and some key issues on how to nurture it in any Language Centre.

2.2 Participant activities

2.2.1 An overview

Of the 12 participants, 9 completed the course in time, two have applied for an extension for the final reflection report deadline, and two withdrew. Table 1 provides an overview of the participant activities during the course as well as their background in terms of their University degree level. Some activities, such as diary writing or informal peer group meetings (to which we will return below), were not directly observable by the counsellor, but the information on individual participant activities has been absorbed from their work plans, the final reflection reports and information available in counselling meetings.

Table 1: Participant profiles and activities during the course (N = 13).

	Participated actively in Organized Peer Group Sessions	Participated actively in Informal Peer Group Sessions	Met the counsellor in extra meetings (= more than twice)	Were active in diary writing	Engaged in research (doing research)	Doctoral Degree (completed or in progress)
Participants who completed the course (9)	8	7	2	4	9	4
Participants whose final report had not been submitted in time (2)	1	0	1	0	2	1
Participants who withdrew from the course (2)	1	0	0	1	1	1
All (N)	10	7	3	5	12	6

(Information from the two drop-outs and those who had not turned in their final reflection report is naturally more limited.)

As Table 1 indicates on the formal experience and background of the participants, six out of 13 have a doctoral degree completed or in progress. While educational background may be associated with willingness to participate in a course involving research engagement in the first place, we can see that the doctoral degree as such does not seem to predict success in completing the work plan process involving research engagement (see Table 1). The majority of the participants completing the course have a Master's-level qualification. Thus, one need not be particularly research-oriented in order to be research-engaged, and on the other hand, former engagement in research is not an indicator of success or commitment in research engagement in a professional development context such as this.

All participants were allowed to engage in any type of research they felt comfortable with (for an overview of potential alternatives, see Borg 2010). Table 1 indicates that all but one of the 13 participants ended up engaged in research. From the counsellor's observation perspective, it is evident that any teacher can enjoy research as part of their professional development and become enthusiastic about it. In November 20<sup>th</sup> I wrote in my diary (translated from Finnish):

Today I had three counselling sessions. [...] I was happy because I felt that all teachers left the meeting feeling relieved and/or enthusiastic. Their project plans became clearer or started to roll, and X sent me a lovely message afterwards telling how important and inspiring she felt our meeting had been. Such a lovely end to this week!

Half of the language instructors in the present course applied the inclusive principles of Exploratory Practice (EP). Action research was also applied, involving, for example, questionnaire and video data collecting in the classroom. Individual research procedures (data collection, analysis, etc.) were discussed in counselling sessions, PG-meetings and later in a Seminar Day, which was open to all LC staff and other potential participants in the Faculty of Arts and Behavioral Sciences. These occasions provided feedback and encouragement for the individual processes of which quite many have continued further even after the course. One of the participants said that he kept forgetting the whole course as he was so deeply involved in his project work. I wrote in my diary that this was perhaps the most delightful comment ever, since this is what the course was ultimately for: supporting individuals in their personal commitment and capacity to carry out research-engaged development work.

Table 1 reveals an interesting detail. Neither of the two withdrawals or the other two participants who have not to date turned in their final reports participated in any Informal Peer Group Sessions (IPG), while 7 out of 9 of those who

completed the course did. This gives a reason to examine more closely the reflections available on the IPG’s – the form of peer support that popped up without any formal planning. What was the role or meaning of informal peer support in the autonomous research processes?

2.2.2 Informal peer groups (IPG)

From the Organized Peer Group sessions (OPG) there emerged two informal peer groups (IPG) among the course participants. This came out in the final reflection reports and the counselling session discussions with individual participants. The two informal peer groups are referred to as Group A and Group B below.

There was a similar number of members in both informal groups, but the activity profiles of the groups were somewhat different (see Table 2 for the details). Group A met regularly on a weekly basis throughout the 7 months, while Group B had only few pre-planned meetings altogether. Most participants participated actively in the OPGs too (see Table 1). The IPG groups also differed in that the members of Group A did not have a mutual focus of interest in their individual work plans, while Group B members did. This is to some extent reflected in the experiences of peer support within the IPG groups. Although both groups report benefitting from peer reflections, members of Group A report more on the emotional and motivational meaning of this peer support, as illustrated in extracts (1) and (2) below.

- (1) Our peer support group was caring, thoughtful and wise and I looked forward to the weekly meetings that provided both accountability and empathy. (“Annie” from Group A; originally in English)

Table 2: IPG group profiles.

Group A	Group B
Four members	Three members
Regular, about weekly short meetings	Fewer, longer meetings
Sessions concentrated on sharing about the individual project progress + reading and writing circle	Sessions were pre-planned: common research literature, a reading circle, catching up with the individual projects (and other things)
Each member had their own focus of interest (two relatively similar)	Common development interest
No reports on other type of informal sharing besides frequent meetings	Collaboration also via email

- (2) The reading and writing circle were essential in supporting my pedagogical development as we discussed and recommended reading material and guided one another with the projects. This mutual support was essential in completing the course as it provided a motivation tool. (“Adriane” from IPG team A; originally in English)

IPG group B, which had fewer meetings with more target oriented meeting agendas, also reports on the usefulness of the meetings (see the extracts 3 and 4). According to the members of this team, the meaning of the group appeared a bit more practical, although not necessarily less important:

- (3) In reading group sessions we also discussed our own projects and settled a lunch date for March in order to catch up how is it going with our projects. I also sent to both of my colleagues material concerning [details removed] that they both benefitted from in their own projects. (“Betty” from IPG team B; translated from Finnish)
- (4) Our reading group had a meeting on January 25th. The literature we discussed helped me to figure out peer feedback as a pedagogical tool in the wider context of the feedback framework. (“Barry” from IPG team B, translated from Finnish)

The meaningfulness of (informal) peer support does not come as a surprise but seems an essential part of the enthusiasm of professional development (see also Bradley et al. 2016). Vieira (2010: 26) argues that “[...] positive feelings are probably the most important outcome and driving force of our struggles for autonomy in education”, and calls for teacher education that enhances inquiry, narrating and disseminating teachers’ own practice. In the next Section, I will focus on the UniPeda ALMS course teachers’ experiences on research engagement.

### 3 Participants’ experiences of research engagement

As many of the extracts above already illustrate, peer exchanges appeared important during the individual research processes, providing both emotional and practical support. Exploratory Practice appeared as an inspiring alternative for many, since – as one of the pioneers of EP, Judith Hanks has pointed out (2015: 612) – EP does not pull practitioners away from their instructional

responsibilities but allows research in the form of mutual development together with learners: see extracts (5) and (6).

- (5) The final strand in the methodological approach was that of Exploratory Practice. Three of EP's seven principles were particularly in mind during this project: working for understanding, working for quality of life, and integrating this work into "existing curricular practices" (Allwright and Hanks 2009). By using the students' academic writing learning diaries, I was able to understand their learning processes more deeply, engage with the issues affecting their quality of life and, as this was a required course task, not impose "extra" work on the students while conducting my project work. The students were also thus involved in the "research" process, reflecting on and writing about their writing development, becoming researchers of themselves. ("Alex"; originally in English)
- (6) "The puzzle" which developed was how can all the individual needs of the students be met in terms of their written work. This was discussed in the reading and writing circle attended by three colleagues and myself who met weekly to discuss pedagogical developmental practices. After this first meeting [= IPG] the aim of the project became clearer. [...] The project developed from here. The first counselling meeting too was essential in defining the project and in addition supported further reading in this area. ("Adriane"; originally in English)

The final, open Seminar Day presentations at the end of the course and the final reflection reports illuminated the fact that all teachers had been involved in a meaningful process in terms of professional development. The combination of formal support (counselling sessions and organized peer group sessions together with research literature) has played a role here. On the basis of my own diary, counselling sessions seem to have been particularly important for those participants who shared less with colleagues. In the final reflection reports, the support (peers, counselling) and the meaning of diary writing as a reflection tool has been considered important in the individual processes of research and, ultimately, in the process of development as a teacher; see extracts 7–9 for examples.

- (7) During the winter I have written about 12 pages of learning diary and on top of that, pretty much notes on what I have read. [...] I realize that my way of working [as a teacher] is nowadays more reflective and confident, and I believe that it's pretty much because of this project. ("Betty"; translated from Finnish)



- (8) For me, the course “events” – counselling, support groups, peer-feedback, for example – provided motivation to write the diary, and in return the diary provided material for the course events. [...] I read and then wrote about it in my diary, which then led me to read more – which leads me to conclusion that the diary keeping must not be an isolated event, but rather tied into a larger ecology of professional practice and development. (“Alex; originally in English)

For some of the teachers, research engagement in teaching development was new and initially something quite stressful. Evidently, there have been moments of uncertainty, but in the end, the experience was fruitful as extract 9 from “Annie’s” reflection report indicates:

- (9) In my Pre Assignment for the course I wrote: During busy work periods ... I see the piles of books on my desk, the half-there course that I’ve decided to revamp, and I wonder if I’m just making my life unnecessarily difficult precisely with this enthusiasm for research.. I had suffered from carrying out my work in enthusiastic bursts that burn out, but the steady pace of the course was truly helpful and a habit that I think I will be able to maintain. (“Annie”; originally in English)

## 4 Future prospects: key issues in fostering research engagement of language teachers

Traditionally, teacher research in Language Centres has been a complex issue due to the strong profile of a teaching institution. Although the benefits of teacher research have been widely understood and documented, there are still hurdles, as briefly discussed at the beginning of this report. Vieira (2010: 14) has referred to teachers as “intellectual agents of change”, and in this vein one can only agree on the importance of supporting reflection and research engagement of practitioners. The benefits range from enthusiasm and motivation to increasing self-esteem and quality of teaching. This report focused on a formal context, a University Pedagogy course module within which language teachers had a systematically supported opportunity to carry out a teaching development process involving research engagement. Teachers report having obtained new ways of seeing and talking about their work (as echoed in previous teacher research literature, e.g. Borg 2010, 2013; Borg and Sanchez 2015a; Lehtonen et al. 2015b)

and engaging themselves in a professional development practice in which research plays a most natural role.

Practitioners' engagement with and in research can also fight the challenge of research and teaching practices developing distinct from each other. Little (2016) has argued that the so called social turn in theories of L2 acquisition has failed to challenge the mainstream pedagogical tradition. Similar observations have been reported by, for example, Dufva et al. (2011) and Vaattovaara (2016). This, one can argue, is due largely to the distinctiveness of the research and teaching professions. As a solution, Little (2016) proposes Exploratory Practice as an inclusive learning environment, and this is suggested also by the present case study of the UniPeda ALMS course. EP is a form of research which potentially increases the quality of life of both learners and teachers (for full analysis of EP, see Allwright and Hanks 2009). For teachers, this form of practitioner research offers a possibility for deepening their understanding of pedagogical and learning processes in a personally meaningful and also relatively easy way, while putting the practitioner into the role of critical inquirer. Connection to research (literature) through engagement in research makes the research literature personal and worthwhile.

Borg and Sanchez (2015b: 3) have listed a number of preconditions for teacher research, starting from the understanding of what research is, and covering factors such as motivation and skills, as well as institutional resources and support. Recognizing the range of all the different challenges, the course discussed in the present report suggests that there are two elements that are initially important for personal satisfaction in research engagement:

- Time: moments for contextual reflection (at least short but regular periods of time) in order to make sense of the research literature and carry out the individual development/research process in the local context;
- Sense of community: sharing the process with other colleagues.

As mentioned earlier, previous experience in research does not seem necessary, and as Borg and Sanchez (2015b: 3) also emphasize, the conditions need not be perfect in order for language teachers to become research-engaged. On the basis of our local example presented above, it is also not as important to have colleagues sharing the same focus of interest as it is to have colleagues around engaged in a similar work process, i.e., research engagement (of some kind). Provided that a supportive community emerges, the requisite time also seems to emerge. The very first steps might be easier to take if “research” is discussed rather as “research informed professional development”. On the level of

attitudes, this seems to make a difference among both language teachers as well as the university management.

The University of Helsinki Language Centre has a long tradition of supporting research engagement, and frameworks for doing so, and the fruits are evident (see Lehtonen et al. 2015a). Although there is no complete agreement on whether research needs to be published in order to be counted as research (see Wyatt et al. 2016 for this discussion), the University of Helsinki LC has worked towards the goal of a research-engaged unit of the University through, among other things, the institution's own publication series.<sup>2</sup> For some strands of professional development, writing is also an essential tool (Vieira 2010; Bradley et al. 2016). While the LC is gaining a reputation as an expert organization engaged in research, a growing number of the LC instructors have adopted the identity of practitioner researcher. It is up to Language Centres to encourage bottom-up development interests and find ways to support practitioner research activities. Fostering collegiality and a community of research-engaged practitioners is, however, a good investment. A research-engaged community of practice is a powerful agent in challenging pedagogical traditions that are in need of reassessment.

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<sup>2</sup> The Language Centre Publication Series is an openly peer reviewed publication in which the local LC teachers actively publish their research and development work: <https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/25140?locale-attribute=en>

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